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ABSTRACT

Cartoons are generally regarded as "kids' stuff," unworthy of scholarly study. As an aspect of popular culture, television cartoons do not attract scholars who are interested in being part of the "critical elite." Some scholars believe, however, that less time should be spent discussing how TV might be used to teach children what society thinks they should know and more time looking at what lessons children are learning from the programs they watch. And, the fact is that many adults also watch cartoons intended primarily for children. This study used E. G. Bormann's fantasy theme theory to analyze 10 episodes of the animated television series "Animaniacs." A 30-minute episode of "Animaniacs" contains between two and seven cartoons. Each cartoon has a separate plot and theme, with a cast of stock characters for each setting and plot idea. Certain recurring themes within the programs were identified: a stress on intelligence and learning; the wrongness of egotism, selfishness, and rudeness toward others; the value of observing and thinking for oneself; and the importance of media literacy. Messages the cartoons in "Animaniacs" send attempt to counteract and discourage traits often found in U.S. society; i.e., gullibility, addiction to mass consumption, and admiration of the self-important, the wealthy, and the powerful. Future research should examine: (1) whether educators and parents could benefit from knowing if children are merely entertained or if they learn from cartoons; (2) why adults watch a cartoon targeted to school-age children; (3) how other children's TV programs compare to "Animaniacs"; and (4) what else scholars can learn from the television medium. (Contains 29 references.) (NKA)

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Running head: KIDS' STUFF

"Kids' Stuff": Television Cartoons as Mirrors of the American Mind

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Abstract

This essay uses Bormann's fantasy theme theory to analyze ten episodes from the animated television series *Animaniacs*. After providing justification for the study, the author identifies recurring themes within the program which include a stress on intelligence and learning; the wrongness of egotism, selfishness and rudeness toward others; the value of observing and thinking for oneself; and the importance of media literacy. Finally, the rhetorical vision of the series' creators and the commentary the series makes about American culture are discussed.

"Kids' Stuff": Cartoons as Mirrors of the American Mind

> "Wherever there is belching, we'll be there. Wherever there is stupidity, we'll be there! Wherever there is candy, we'll be there a lot quicker!"
>
> -- the Warner Brothers (Ruegger, 1995e)
>
> "Now that's comedy!" -- Slappy Squirrel (Ruegger, 1995b, 1995f)

Once, animation held a strong position in our society, as people of all ages and walks of life enjoyed cartoons in the movie theatre and on their television sets. The humor of the early cartoons was aimed at audiences of all ages and sophistication levels. In recent decades, however, cartoons lost their cross-generational appeal. Cartoons became "kids' stuff", relegated to the "TV ghetto" (Kellogg, 1992, p. 6; Waters, 1990a) of Saturday mornings and weekday afternoons, when children were expected to be the primary audience. Animated programs were generally half-hour commercials for toy companies (interspersed with actual commercials for sugary cereals and more toys), and were "either stupidly violent or violently stupid" (Waters, 1992, p. 69).

The 1990s have seen a change in the genre of animated television programs. Our society is in the midst of a "toon boom" (Kellogg, 1992). The trend began in the motion picture industry, where animated features became box office money-makers and even received Oscar nominations. The Fox network aired *The Simpsons* in a prime-time slot in January 1990, and it quickly gained a viewership large enough to place it in the Top 15 in Nielson ratings (Waters, 1990b). This made it the first successful animated, weekly series since *The Flintstones* in the 1960s (Reese, 1989). Then, Ted Turner created the 24-hour

Cartoon Network in October 1992 (Kellogg, 1992). A study funded by TBS shows that adults comprise 44 percent of cartoon viewers (Waldrop, 1993); the Cartoon Network claims that half of its audience are adults (Kellogg, 1992). The rise of the cartoon from "kiddie fluff" to its former status as entertainment for the entire family is still continuing.

Warner Brothers decided to take advantage of this trend and created a new generation of cartoon characters, in the same format as their classic Looney Tunes. To do this, they joined forces with Stephen Spielberg. The first product of this collaboration was *Tiny Toon Adventures*, which first aired on weekday afternoons in the fall of 1990. Although its time slot testifies that *Tiny Toons'* primary audience is school-age children, the creators also intended to attract older viewers (Waters, 1990a). They not only wanted to rely on the nostalgia of baby boomer parents (and non-parents) for their childhood favorites (see Kellogg, 1992; and Russell, 1992), they interspersed juvenile and slap-stick forms of humor with more sophisticated satire and references to other pieces of literature and pop culture. Spielberg and Warner Brothers then went on to create another new cartoon, *Animaniacs*, which first appeared in the fall of 1993 on the Fox network. It moved to the Warner Brothers Channel in September 1995. *Animaniacs* carries this blend of adult and children's humor even farther (Marin, 1993), and has been able to attract an audience large enough to make it "the second most popular children's series on television" (Gates, 1995, p. 31). Almost a quarter of its viewership is age 25 or older (Gates, 1995).

Animaniacs has received positive reviews from several critics (Gates, 1995; Marin, 1993; Mitchard, 1994, 1995; Waters, 1993), who particularly praise it for

its broad appeal, sophisticated humor, and educational value. This essay will focus on this particular animated series, as the pinnacle of the new genre of television cartoons. After establishing why this series is worthy of study as a rhetorical artifact, I will examine ten episodes of *Animaniacs* for recurring themes. Finally, I will show what this cartoon reveals about contemporary American culture.

Why A Cartoon?

Marshall McLuhan (1962) stated: "Many people feel uneasy when serious attention is paid to objects and subjects that they are accustomed to classify as 'trash'" (as cited in Bianculli, 1992, p. 248). Many scholars question the worth of studying artifacts such as animated television series. Cartoons have three reasons against giving them such serious consideration.

First, they are an aspect of popular culture. Throughout history, the "critical elite" has refused to accept anything as worthy of notice that has the acceptance of a common, mass audience (Bianculli, 1992). Second, these cartoons are on television, which has been called "the vast wasteland" so often the term has become a cliche'. This again has historic precedence, as the most recent medium of popular esteem is always denigrated by intellectuals -- until it is supplanted by something else. Bianculli (1992) cites examples of this behavior dating all the way back to Ancient Greece and the distrust then given to poetry and drama. "One generation's Devil-gods are another generation's demi-gods, just as one generation's object of low disdain often emerges as a later generation's high art" (p. 28).

Other scholars also defend the study of television. Kottak (1990) justifies his interest in television by pointing out, "The most significant cultural forces are those that affect us every day of our lives" (p. 8). He later states: "The common

information that members of a mass society come to share as a result of watching the same thing is indisputably culture..." (p. 8). Rybacki and Rybacki (1991) note the variety of rhetorical activities presented on television and call it "worthy of rhetorical criticism" (p. 271).

The third reason that cartoons are not treated as worthy of scholarly study is that they are regarded as "kids' stuff", mind-numbing fluff that tired parents use as temporary baby-sitters. As previously noted, this has certainly been true of most cartoons of the 1970s and 1980s. It is also true, however, that ignoring the content of what children feed their minds on is the same as ignoring what they feed their bodies. Some scholars have chosen to examine children's shows, with the goal of criticizing their violence or their lack of educational value. Otherwise, television cartoons have been largely neglected.

According to Kottak (1990), scholars should spend less time discussing "how TV might be used to teach kids what society thinks they should know" (p. 151), and instead look at what lessons children are in reality learning from the programs they watch. Television, he believes, is an indelible feature in the enculturalization or socialization process which teaches children their culture.

Combine this need with the large percentage of adults who are watching cartoons like *Animaniacs*, and compelling reasons to examine a cartoon as a cultural artifact containing rhetorical value present themselves. *Animaniacs* is a particularly good candidate for rhetorical study because of its quality of writing and its popularity with a wide range of age groups. The program's senior producer Tom Ruegger says, "Every cartoon we make is grounded in our cultural reality" (Marin, 1993, P. 31).

Because cartoons are based on humor, they are especially apt texts for examining culture. "Humor may be the one [genre] most closely tied to the particulars of the rhetor's culture and its success is most dependent on the audience's knowledge of that culture," state Rybacki and Rybacki (1991, p. 310). A popular cartoon, such as *Animaniacs*, must draw its material from the cultural reality of a large percentage of the population.

Methods

The symbolic convergence theory of Bormann (1972, 1985) provides a framework within which to examine what that cultural reality may be. Symbolic convergence theory accepts that one's communication creates reality, and that groups of people can share a reality through a converging, or sharing, of their symbolic interpretations. The sharing of narratives, or fantasies, brings a group together, because they share a common experience through them. These fantasies then shape the group members' reality.

Bormann (1985) believes that when a critic identifies the fantasy themes that pervade the rhetoric of a group, the critic can then determine how the rhetorical vision comprised by those themes helps that group order and interpret their social reality. The underlying motivations of the rhetor will also become apparent (Bormann, 1972). The critic first identifies the presence of symbolic convergence, by looking for frequent references to particular themes or narratives, or noting the repetition of code words and phrases, certain slogans, or nonverbal cues (Foss, 1989). The fantasy themes are then coded and patterns identified in them.

The texts for this analysis are ten episodes from the series (Ruegger, 1995a, 1995b, 1995c, 1995d, 1995e, 1995f, 1995g, 1995h, 1995i, 1995j). The program was videotaped every weekday from television beginning March 27 to April 18. Ten episodes were then chosen as being most representative of the series and subsequently analyzed according to the fantasy theme methodology.

Examination of Artifact.

A thirty-minute episode of *Animaniacs* contains between two to seven cartoons. Each cartoon has a separate plot and theme of its own. *Animaniacs* has a cast of stock characters, each based in a specific setting and plot idea. The scope of this paper does not allow an examination of all of these, but in the ten episodes which I analyzed certain characters and themes appeared most often.

Significance of Title. The show's title is a combination of two words: "animated" and "maniacs". These two words describe the characters of the show. The "animated maniacs" are led by the Warners.

The Warner Brothers. The main characters of the series are the "Warner Brothers", who are in actuality two brothers and a sister. Yakko, the eldest, his brother Wakko, and their sister Dot are Warner creations of indeterminate species. During the 1940s they were imprisoned in the water tower on the Warner Brothers Studio lot, because the three children were just too zany and out-of-control for their creators to handle. However, they occasionally escape to plague everyone they meet. According to Ruegger, the writers base the Warners' personalities on "real kids, with that creating-havoc-in-the-back-of-the-car energy" (Gates, 1995, p. 38).

Besides appearing in the opening and ending sequences, the Warner siblings are featured in at least one cartoon in all ten episodes. They also make a cameo appearance in nearly all of the other cartoons.

In eight cartoons, the plot involves the Warners harassing a well-known individual or stereotypical character. Einstein (Ruegger, 1995a), President Lincoln (Ruegger, 1995c), Michaelangleo (Ruegger, 1995g), and the Queen of England (Ruegger, 1995f) must deal with the three's mischievous antics, but in the end are inspired by them to success. In contrast, a claim-jumping miner (Ruegger, 1995h), an egotistical accountant (Ruegger, 1995b), radio-personality "Howie Tern" (Ruegger, 1995e), and actor "Willie Slakmer" (Ruegger, 1995d) find that being the Warners' "special friends" destroys their sanity.

Other cartoons feature the Warners' version of classic fairy tales and nursery rhymes (Ruegger, 1995e). Two of the cartoons in the sample (Ruegger, 1995a,1995c) have a Warner delivering a geography lesson to music . Another common feature is "The Wheel of Morality", which appears at the end of five episodes (Ruegger, 1995a, 1995e, 1995f, 1995g, 1995i).

Pinky and the Brain. These two lab mice are another pair of characters in the series, who appear in four of the examined episodes (Ruegger, 1995a, 1995d, 1995i, 1995j). Each cartoon begins and ends with versions of the same dialogue exchange:

> "What do you want to do tonight [tomorrow night], Brain?"
>
> "The same thing we do every night, Pinky. Try to take over the world."

The Brain is a rodent genius with ruling ambitions; Pinky is his less-than-able assistant who apparently has undergone one too many shock treatments. Their

adventures consist of bad luck, small stature, and Pinky's bungling all combining to destroy another of Brain's elaborate schemes to achieve world domination.

One cartoon, "Win Big" (Ruegger, 1995a), has the Brain become a contestant on the quiz game show "Gyp-Parody". He fails to win only because he cannot answer the Final Gyp-Parody question -- about Pinky's favorite tv show.

"When Mice Ruled the Earth" (Ruegger, 1995i) has the Brain and Pinky travel in H. G. Wells' time machine to "the dawn of time". Their goal is to change the course of evolution in favor of mice over humans. In "The Helpinki Formula" (Ruegger, 1995j), the two mice try to sell the Brain's shrinking formula on an infomercial. In the final cartoon from the sample, the Brain attempts to become a superhero called "Cranial Crusader" (Ruegger, 1995d), which is also the cartoon's title. Each of these schemes to rule the world fails when everything goes awry, forcing the mice to abandon the plan.

Slappy Squirrel. This female character is featured in two of the episodes (Ruegger, 1995b, 1995f). Slappy Squirrel is an aged cartoon character. Despite age and a tinge of grumpiness, she proves regularly that she still has the comedic genius to best foes, both old and new. Often her young nephew Skippy aids her.

The first cartoon, titled "...And Justice for Slappy" (Ruegger, 1995f), is set in a court room. Slappy is defending herself in Wolf County Court, where she faces trumped-up charges of "assault with intent to squash" an old nemesis, Walter Wolf. She faces railroading from a wolf judge and all-wolf jury, but she manages to pull off a "not guilty" verdict. Having once again outwitted Walter and his friends and thwarted their plans, she performs her traditional close: blow up the villains and retort, "Now that's comedy."

In "Guardin' the Garden" (Ruegger, 1995b), Slappy lives in the Garden of Eden. Specifically, she lives in the Tree of Knowledge, which she has been charged with guarding. The infamous Serpent finds his task of tempting Eve with the forbidden fruit impossible. Slappy repeats her infamous close.

Chicken Boo. This character appears in three episodes in this sample (Ruegger, 1995c, 1995d, 1995j). Chicken Boo is a six-foot chicken who insists on dressing up and masquerading as a human. The funny part is that the humans don't notice, even though he *looks* like a chicken and cannot talk. In the episodes under examination, Boo cartoons parody well-known motion picture characters: Davy Crockett (called Davy Omellette in this version) (Ruegger, 1995c), James Bond ("Boo, James Boo") (Ruegger, 1995d), and *The Karate Kid* (Moo Goo Gai Boo) (Ruegger, 1995j).

In all three cartoons, "Davy Omelette","The Chicken Who Loved Me", and "Kung Boo", only one human character sees through Boo's disguise. The other people refuse to listen to him, choosing to believe in the rumors and vast reputation attached to the chicken's name. Each Boo cartoon ends when he is unclothed and his poultry heritage revealed. "I told you that guy was a chicken," the observant characters retort. The giant chicken is then driven off or runs away to avoid being dinner.

Recurring Themes

Comedic as these characters and their situations sound, a careful examination reveals certain recurring themes that have a meaning deeper than mere entertainment. These themes are a stress on intelligence and learning; the

wrongness of egotism, selfishness and rudeness toward others; the value of observing and thinking for oneself; and the importance of media literacy.

Intelligence and learning is "cool". Despite its entertainment trappings, *Animaniacs* presents its viewers with characters who exhibit intelligence, as well as giving actual educational lessons. The Warners, Slappy Squirrel, and the Brain gain much of their appeal from their ability to outwit others. The Warners exhibit the cleverness and insight of precocious children. The wisecracking Slappy has the wisdom of age and experience. The Brain is a genius.

Several cartoons in this sample contain lessons in geography and the cultures of other nations. Yakko uses a map, a pointer, and a song to show viewers the nations of the world (Ruegger, 1995a). Wakko plays the violin and sings about the states and their capitols (Ruegger, 1995c). Dot takes a trip around the world, visiting various countries in search of a quiet place to read (Ruegger, 1995h). One cartoon, "Windsor Hassle" (Ruegger, 1995f), is set in England's Windsor Castle, complete with the royal family in residence. One of the examined episodes (Ruegger, 1995j) is entirely devoted to international themes; the opening song for this show was sung in French.

History lessons also appear in the ten episodes. The Warners visit President Lincoln (Ruegger, 1995c), Albert Einstein (Ruegger, 1995a), and Michaelangelo (Ruegger, 1995g), and the Old West during the Gold Rush (Ruegger, 1995h). "When Mice Ruled the Earth" (Ruegger, 1995i) not only has Pinky and the Brain go back in time to pre-history, it gives bits of history as well. Kids learn that aspirin was invented in 1853, and that Julius Caesar said, "I came, I saw, I conquered." One unusual cartoon (Ruegger, 1995c) in the sampled episodes did not feature any

of the stock characters, but instead told the story of Thomas Jefferson and the Declaration of Independence from the viewpoint of Jefferson's candle flame.

References to literature were also evident. Slappy appears in Genesis' Garden of Eden (Ruegger, 1995b). Pinky and the Brain watch H. G. Wells finish his novel *The Time Machine* (Ruegger, 1995i). The Warners help Lincoln craft the Gettysburg Address, and quote Shakespeare (Ruegger, 1995c.

Egotistical and rude behavior is not rewarded. Characters who act in an egotistical manner or who treat others rudely do not fare well in *Animaniacs'* cartoons. The Brain is the most obvious example. His virtue, discussed earlier, is his extreme intelligence. However, his genius causes him to aspire to rule the world. In every cartoon, fate always thwarts his plans, no matter how well laid. Often, his pride leads to his downfall.

The Warners' cartoons present other cases for this point. Many of the villains they trounce are repugnant egotists, whose arrogance and rude behavior to the three children leads to their ruin. This sample gave several examples (Ruegger, 1995b, 1995d, 1995e). One is Howie Tern, a rude and crude radio talk show host modeled from Howard Stern. Another is a haughty accountant, Ivan Blowsky, whose seems to be a parody of Ivan Boesky. The Warners also bring destruction to Willie Slakmer, a vain actor who sounds and appears suspiciously like William Shatner, and a claim jumping miner called Prospector Jake.

In contrast, the Warners assist Einstein (Ruegger, 1995a) and Lincoln (Ruegger, 1995c), who do not treat them badly. In two cartoons (Ruegger, 1995d, 1995j) the Warners even find the tables turned. Their own selfish and rude behavior leads to a bad ending for them.

At first, the two Slappy cartoons seem to violate this theme. Slappy insults others, hits them with anvils and hammers, blows them up, and is vengeful. Two points can be made in defense of her, however. The villains she deals with bring their own misfortune by attacking her, like Walter Wolf (Ruegger, 1995f), or seeking to steal something from her, as does the Serpent (Ruegger, 1995b). Their flaws are worse than hers. Also, Slappy is a senior citizen, and our society allows and expects a certain level of crotchetiness in older people. It should be noted that cartoon shows rarely portray seniors at all, and certainly not as major characters. The fact that Slappy and many of the villains she encounters are graying but far from dead, feeble, or boring is in itself an important lesson for viewers.

As a final note on this theme, one cartoon (Ruegger, 1995h) titled "A Gift of Gold" gives added emphasis to pro-social behavior. "Gift" does not feature any of the stock characters, but uses the brief life of a piece of gold wrapping paper to give two lessons. One is the ego theme. The paper is overly vain about herself, but finds that her beauty does not prevent her from being tossed into the garbage like the other remnants of the party. The second lesson comes from a juxtaposition of two families. The family who buys the paper to wrap a department-store gift live an upper-class suburban lifestyle, where much is wasted and unappreciated. In contrast, a homeless family who find and re-use the paper at the end of the cartoon appreciate the value of "the little things", like a recycled birthday present, in crumpled but pretty paper, given with love.

Don't Follow the Crowd. The Chicken Boo cartoons (Ruegger, 1995c, 1995d, 1995j) all share the same theme: don't believe everything people say, even if the majority agree with it. People who interact with Boo fail to see through his

false persona because they do not wish to. They have heard that he is this wonderful person with legendary abilities, and become so intrigued with the stories that they do not give the object of these legends close examination. The characters see only what they wish to see.

There is an obvious parallel here to the fable "The Emperor's New Clothes", but unlike the latter, the voice of dissent does not wake up the crowd. The lone person who speaks up is not only ignored but silenced. Only when the masquerade completely falls apart do the majority acknowledge that they have made a mistake.

The lessons here are that the numbers do not make truth; the majority voice can be wrong. People need to listen to the minority opinion, which may be the voice of reason. Also, one needs to use one's own observations and mind in making judgments, not rely on the views of one's peers. In addition, people should see others for who they really are, rather than who they wish them to be.

Understand the Media We Use. Many people, especially children, are vulnerable targets for advertisers and other media people because of their unsophisticated understanding of the mass media. Through parody, *Animaniacs* provides insight into aspects of media that some of its viewers might not have examined critically before.

For instance, the recurring feature, "The Wheel of Morality" (Ruegger, 1995a, 1995e, 1995f, 1995g, 1995i), is a satirical jab at other children's shows which use phony morals touted at the end of the program to justify itself to parents and activists (Waters, 1992). The Warners spin the Wheel, which once it stops spits out "the moral of today's story". Typical morals are, "Never ask what hot

dogs are made of" (Ruegger, 1995g), and "Win a free trip to Tahiti" (Ruegger, 1995i).

In one cartoon (Ruegger, 1995i), the characters even explain the Wheel's existence:

> Yakko: "The Wheel of Morality adds boring educational value to what would otherwise be an almost entirely entertaining program."
>
> Dot: "But the morals make no sense!"
>
> Wakko: "It's totally bogus."
>
> Dot: "Who came up with this stupid Wheel of Morality idea, anyway?"
>
> Yakko: "The execs at the Fox network."
>
> Dot: "They did? What a great idea!"

Another episode (Ruegger, 1995j) parodies program-length infomercials. When Pinky and the Brain take their shrinking formula on "Amazingly Fantastic Stuff", their experience highlights the inanity of the host, audience, and guest stars, as well as the credulity of the average viewer of such programs.

Other cartoons make commentaries on movies (Ruegger, 1995i), radio talk shows (Ruegger, 1995e), and even the English royal family (Ruegger, 1995f).

The Vision and American Culture

These themes can be seen as components in one central vision. *Animaniacs* stresses learning and using intelligence, while considering the feelings of others. These are the same values that educators attempt to instill in children. However, children who tune out teachers, parents and "educational programing", will accept this message, because it is delivered by "animated maniacs" in a show full of sight

gags and general wackiness. There can be little doubt that this was the intention of Spielberg and Warner Brothers.

The number of adult viewers of the series (Gates, 1995) indicate that these people share a belief in these fantasy themes. When they are enjoying sly references to old television shows and Shakespeare, and laughing at parodies the children do not understand, they are seeing the commentary the show's creators are making about American culture.

What are the *Animaniacs*' cartoons saying about our society? They note our gullibility, our addiction to mass consumption, and our misplaced admiration for the self-important, the wealthy and the powerful. The characters expose our vanities, greed and vices, in a humorous manner. *Animaniacs* attempts to bring more socially conscious, positive values into the minds of viewers. Whether the show takes the audience to a homeless family's station-wagon, the signing of the Declaration of Independence, Windsor Castle, or the making of an infomercial, this series encourages them to look at these places and people, to possibly see them in a different light, and to think about the messages given.

And most importantly, it makes viewers laugh. That is why people watch cartoons in the first place.

Implications for Future Research

This analysis has revealed several questions for future study. First, what effect do cartoons like *Animaniacs* have on viewing children? Educators and parents could benefit from knowing if children learn from cartoons, or if they are only entertained?

Secondly, why do adults watch a cartoon show targeted to school-age children? A survey of the adult viewers of *Animaniacs* could reveal some interesting in-sight into American culture.

Third, how do other children's television programs compare to this one? Critics should examine other cartoons, as well as children's programs of all types, in analyses similar to this one. If, as Kottak (1990) believes, television is an important part of the enculturalization of American children, it obviously becomes important to understand what comprises the culture that this medium is teaching them.

Finally, what else can scholars learn from this medium? The scholarly community must accept television as an important component of American society. While it remains tempting to dismiss the medium as unworthy of notice to serious scholars, this attitude is no longer a feasible one. The future promises to make television more, not less, a part of the culture. Much more research should be done to better understand the medium. This research should concentrate not just on negative messages such as violence, but should also look at the positive and neutral messages in television programming.

It is this critic's contention that the power of television can be and sometimes is used in positive ways. This examination of *Animaniacs* provides evidence of this. Finding and recognizing this aspect of television is a goal worthy of any scholar interested in American culture in the twentieth century.

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